

I wanted you to see me survive this

—"You said I was your future

Am I now just your past?"

Est

The problem with being a photographer is that you can't unsee things. Other professions have the luxury of forgetting. Accountants close their spreadsheets and the numbers disappear. Lawyers file their cases and move on to the next disaster. Even doctors, despite dealing with literal life and death, can wash their hands and pretend the day didn't happen.

But photographers? We trap moments in amber. We freeze time and then stare at it obsessively, zooming in on details no one asked us to notice, adjusting shadows that didn't need adjusting, and finding meaning in the particular way light fell across someone's face at 7:43 PM on a Thursday.

Someone whose face I was currently staring at for the forty-seventh time today.

"This is unhealthy," I said aloud to my empty apartment, scrolling to the next photograph. "This is extremely, obviously, pathologically unhealthy."

William looked back at me from my laptop screen, frozen mid-speech, his expression caught somewhere between terror and determination. The gallery lights had done something magical to his cheekbones—or maybe that was just his face, being unfairly structured in ways that made my job both easier and infinitely more difficult.

I'd taken over two thousand photographs at the exhibition opening. Two thousand frames of art and crowds and canapés and well-dressed critics pretending to understand things they definitely didn't understand. And yet, somehow, I kept returning to the same forty or fifty images. The ones featuring William.

William entering the gallery, his hand gripping Lego's elbow like a lifeline.

William standing in front of his mother's portrait, his whole body radiating a grief so raw it hurt to look at.

William at the microphone, index cards trembling in his hands, saying words that had made half the audience cry.

William in that quiet moment after the speech, when he thought no one was watching, his mask slipping just enough to show the exhaustion underneath.

William on the balcony, looking at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"Stop," I told myself firmly. "Stop it. You're editing, not pining."

I scrolled to a different image—a safe one, featuring only artwork and no devastatingly handsome reclusive painters—and began adjusting the exposure. This was fine. This was professional. This was definitely not an elaborate excuse to avoid dealing with the chaos happening inside my chest.

My phone buzzed.

I ignored it.

It buzzed again.

I continued ignoring it, because I was a mature adult who didn't need external validation and definitely wasn't hoping it was a message from—It buzzed a third time.

"Fine," I muttered, reaching for it. "Fine. But if this is another promotional text about pizza delivery, I'm throwing you out the window."

It was not about pizza delivery.

William: Thank you for the photos. They're beautiful.

I stared at the screen for a full thirty seconds, my brain experiencing what I can only describe as a complete system failure. We'd been texting. Since the exhibition. Just small things—brief exchanges about schedules and logistics, the professional maintenance of a working relationship. But this felt different. This felt personal.

They're beautiful.

I could respond in so many ways. Something casual and professional. Something witty and deflecting. Something that didn't reveal the fact that I'd spent the past three hours obsessively editing photographs of his face.

Est: They're honest. That's different from beautiful.

Send. Regret. Consider throwing phone out window anyway.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

William: Is it? I think the best things are both.

Oh, he was doing this. He was actually doing this—having a meaningful conversation via text message like a normal human person instead of the emotionally unavailable disaster I'd been trying to get over for months.

Est: That's very philosophical for 2 PM on a Tuesday.

William: I've been doing a lot of thinking. It's a side effect of leaving my apartment.

Est: The outside world does that to people.

William: Does what?

Est: Makes them think too much. There's a reason hermits exist.

William: I was a hermit. I don't recommend it.

I laughed despite myself—an actual laugh, the kind that surprised me with its genuineness. When had William become funny? Or had he always been funny, and I'd just been too distracted by his brooding artist aesthetic to notice?

Est: What are you doing right now?

The question sent before I could second-guess it. Casual. Normal. Not at all the behavior of someone who was definitely not pining.

William: Looking at my mother's house.

William: It needs a lot of work.

William: Lego says the garden is "salvageable" but I think he's being optimistic.

Est: Lego is always optimistic. It's concerning.

William: He brought snacks. I think he's trying to make renovation seem fun.

William: It is not fun. There is mold.

I was smiling. Why was I smiling? This was a conversation about property damage and fungal growth. There was nothing smile-worthy about mold.

Est: Mold is a character-building experience.

William: I have enough character. I don't need more.

Est: Said every artist ever.

William: Point taken.

Another pause. The three dots appeared, held, disappeared. I waited, my heart doing something stupid and hopeful in my chest.

William: The exhibition runs for six more weeks. Will you be taking more photographs?

Est: Yes. Weekly documentation of any changes to the displays, plus coverage of any special events.

William: That means you'll be there.

Est: That's generally how photography works. Photographer present at location.

William: I know. I meant—

The dots paused again. Longer this time.

William: I'm glad. That you'll be there.

And there it was. That small, honest admission that shouldn't have meant anything and somehow meant everything. I stared at my phone, trying to figure out how to respond in a way that was honest without being too honest, open without being vulnerable, friendly without being—My phone buzzed with a different notification.

Nut: Got the exhibition photos. These are INCREDIBLE. The editorial team is losing their minds. You're a genius and I take full credit for discovering you.

Nut: Wait that came out wrong. I mean I take credit for **HIRING** you. You discovered yourself. Through hard work. And talent.

Nut: Please don't tell HR I said I discovered you that sounds weird.

I snorted. Nut's particular brand of enthusiastic chaos was exactly the distraction I needed.

Est: Your secret is safe. And thank you.

Nut: No seriously Est these are gallery-quality. Multiple galleries are asking about prints. Actual galleries. For actual money.

Est: That's... unexpected.

Nut: It's **DESERVED**. Take the afternoon off. Go celebrate. Drink something expensive. I'll handle the client calls.

I looked back at my laptop screen, where William's face was still frozen in that moment of vulnerable determination. Then at my phone, where our conversation waited for a response I hadn't given.

Take the afternoon off. Go somewhere that wasn't my apartment. Stop staring at photographs of a man I was trying very hard not to be in love with anymore.

It sounded like a plan.

The café I chose was one I'd never been to before, which was the whole point. Familiar places held familiar thoughts. If I went to my usual coffee spot, I'd sit in my

usual seat and think my usual spiraling thoughts about William and his stupid beautiful face and his stupid honest texts and his stupid everything. No. Today required somewhere new. Somewhere free of associations.

The café was called "Bean There, Done That," which was either the worst or best name I'd ever encountered for a business. The interior was aggressively hipster—exposed brick, mismatched furniture, a chalkboard menu featuring drinks with names like "The Existential Espresso" and "Latte, But Make It Fashion."

I ordered something called a "Quarter-Life Crisis" because it seemed appropriate.

"Rough day?" the barista asked, sliding my drink across the counter.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You have that look." She gestured vaguely at my face. "The 'I'm pretending to be fine but actually I'm overthinking everything' look. Very common in our clientele."

"Great. I fit the demographic."

"We also have a 'Please Stop Texting Your Ex' special if you need it. Decaf, because you've already made enough poor decisions."

I accepted my Quarter-Life Crisis and found a seat by the window, pulling out my phone to check if William had responded to my lack of response. He hadn't. Which was fine. Good, even. Healthy space. Appropriate boundaries.

I checked again three minutes later, just to be sure.

Still nothing.

This was fine. I was fine. I was an adult who could go an entire afternoon without obsessively checking his messages like a teenager with their first crush.

I opened Instagram instead, which was a different kind of self-destruction but at least felt more socially acceptable. The first post I saw was from Lego—a photo of himself in what appeared to be an overgrown garden, holding a pair of gardening shears with a caption that read: "Today's mission: convince these roses that they're not weeds. Wish me luck!"

I scrolled past, determined not to engage, and immediately encountered a post from Hong. He was standing in front of a clothing display, wearing an outfit that looked like it had been styled by someone with actual taste—a denim jacket over white, his silver hair gleaming under boutique lighting.

The comments were full of heart emojis and variations of "ICON" from people I didn't recognize. Hong's following had exploded since his university exhibition—turns out being authentically vulnerable about your art made people want to buy

your merch. Who knew.

I liked the post, then immediately worried that liking it would somehow notify everyone I knew that I was sitting alone in a café called "Bean There, Done That" stalking my friends' social media instead of living my own life.

This was getting pathetic.

I drained the rest of my Quarter-Life Crisis and stood up. What I needed was human interaction. Real, in-person conversation with people who could physically stop me from checking my phone every thirty seconds.

I needed Tui.

The tattoo studio looked exactly like it had years ago, when Tui first opened it.

Well, almost exactly. The exterior had been repainted—a deep burgundy that made the "Ink & Ashes" sign pop against the Bangkok street. The window displays featured better artwork now, Hong's designs mixed with Tui's established style, creating a visual story of the studio's evolution. There was a merchandise section visible through the glass, t-shirts and prints and the kind of aesthetic accessories that made influencers lose their minds. But the bones were the same. The same door. The same bell that chimed when you entered. The same particular smell of ink and disinfectant and the coffee that Tui insisted on brewing himself because he was "particular about the grounds."

I'd been here a thousand times since Tui opened the shop. Had watched it grow from a one-person operation in a rented space to this—an actual business with employees and merchandise and a waiting list months long for certain artists.

Tui had done it. He'd taken his dream and made it real. And here I was, still planning trips across Asia that I'd never taken, still editing other people's exhibitions instead of creating my own, still figuring out who I was supposed to be.

The bell chimed as I pushed through the door. Tui looked up from his computer, his expression shifting from professional welcome to genuine warmth when he recognized me.

"Est!" He stood, abandoning whatever he'd been working on, and crossed the studio to meet me. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Surprise visit." I held up the coffee I'd grabbed on the way—Tui's usual order, which I'd memorized approximately seven years ago. "I brought tribute."

"You brought caffeine." He accepted the cup with the reverence it deserved. "Which is the same thing, honestly."

The studio was quiet today—no appointments scheduled during this particular time slot, apparently. The soft background music was something ambient and inoffensive, the kind of thing that made tattoo sessions less painful through the power of pleasant distraction. The space felt both empty and full at the same time—empty of clients, full of potential.

"Slow day?" I asked, settling onto one of the waiting area couches.

He gestured at the general emptiness. "It's just me and the inventory."

"Exciting."

"Thrilling. I've been counting t-shirts for an hour. My life is a constant adventure."

I laughed, some of the tension I'd been carrying starting to ease. This was what I'd needed—Tui's particular brand of dry humor, the familiar comfort of a space that had witnessed most of my adult disasters.

"Actually," Tui continued, eyeing me with the particular expression that meant he was about to say something I didn't want to hear, "I was just about to open the new shipment. Want to help?"

"Help count more t-shirts?"

"Help me open boxes while you tell me whatever's bothering you. I know that face, Est. That's your 'I'm pretending everything is fine but actually I need to talk' face."

"I have a lot of faces, apparently. The barista at the café also diagnosed me."

"Baristas are basically unlicensed therapists. They see everything." He headed toward the back room, gesturing for me to follow. "Come on. Box-opening is therapeutic."

I followed, because he was right and I hated it.

The back room was organized chaos—shelves stacked with supplies, boxes of merchandise waiting to be processed, the particular disorder that came from a business growing faster than its storage solutions.

Tui handed me a box cutter and pointed at a stack of cardboard. "Cut. Unpack. Fold. Tell me what's wrong."

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You're visiting in the middle of a workday with coffee and the energy of someone who's been spiraling alone in their apartment."

"I wasn't in my apartment. I was at a café."

"Spiraling in a café, then."

"It was called 'Bean There, Done That.'"

Tui winced. "That's either the worst or best café name I've ever heard."

"I had the same thought." I cut open the first box, revealing neatly folded black t-shirts featuring one of Hong's designs. "These are nice."

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not—"

"You're absolutely changing the subject. You mentioned the café name instead of telling me what's actually bothering you." Tui took a shirt from the box and began folding it with practiced efficiency. "Is this about William?"

The name landed like a stone dropped into still water.

"Why would it be about William?"

"Because everything has been about William for months. Because you spent half your therapy sessions talking about him. Because I watched you get drunk and cry on my floor about him on more than one occasion." He paused, fixing me with a look. "Should I continue?"

"Please don't."

"Then tell me what happened."

I focused on unpacking the shirts, arranging them into neat stacks that didn't need arranging. The familiar physical task gave my hands something to do while my mouth tried to figure out how to form words.

"The exhibition went well." I said finally.

"I know. I saw the photos. They were incredible."

"He texted me."

"William texted you?"

"Today. About the photos. He said they were beautiful."

"That's... good? That's a compliment?"

"I told him they were honest. That's different from beautiful."

Tui stared at me. "Est."

"What?"

"You are the most dramatic person I know, and I work in the tattoo industry."

"I'm not dramatic!"

"'That's different from beautiful.' You're absolutely dramatic. You turned a compliment into a philosophical discussion about aesthetics."

"It was a clarification!"

"It was dramatic." He shook his head, returning to the shirts. "What did he say after your clarification?"

"He said the best things are both. Honest and beautiful."

"That's... actually quite sweet."

"I know." I stabbed the next box open with more force than necessary. "That's the problem."

"The problem is that he's being sweet?"

"The problem is that I spent months getting over him. Months in therapy, learning about my patterns, understanding why I chase unavailable people. And now he's texting me things like 'the best things are both' and I don't know what to do with that."

Tui set down the shirt he'd been folding and turned to face me fully.

"Do you still have feelings for him?"

"I don't—it's complicated."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have!" I threw the box cutter onto the nearest shelf, frustrated with myself more than anything. "I know I shouldn't. I know he's a storm and I'm supposed to be looking for solid ground. I know all the things my therapist told me about patterns and self-worth and not losing myself in other people. I know."

"But?"

"But he's different now. I can see it. In the exhibition, in the speech he gave, in the way he's texting me. He's actually trying. And I don't know how to reconcile the person who hurt me with the person who's apparently committed to growth."

Tui was quiet for a moment, processing.

"Let me ask you something," he said finally. "If William hadn't hurt you—if you'd met him now, exactly as he is after all his therapy and work—would you want to be with him?"

I didn't answer immediately. Couldn't. Because the honest answer was complicated in ways I didn't want to examine.

"I don't know," I said finally. "Maybe. He's—" I laughed, helpless. "He's still the most attractive person I've ever met. That hasn't changed. And when we talk, really talk, there's this connection that I've never had with anyone else. But I also remember how much it hurt. How lost I got."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Right now? Unpack t-shirts and try not to check my phone every five seconds."

"And in the long term?"

"Take it slow. See what happens. Not rush into anything that could destroy me."

Tui nodded slowly. "That sounds... surprisingly mature."

"Don't sound so shocked."

"I'm not shocked. I'm cautiously optimistic." He picked up another shirt. "Also a little skeptical, because I've watched you make questionable decisions for years and this seems out of character."

"Thank you for your support."

"I'm just saying—don't be so afraid of getting hurt again that you miss something real. But also don't be so desperate for connection that you lose yourself." He paused. "Find the middle ground."

"You make it sound simple."

"It's not. Nothing about love is simple. But you've done the work. You know yourself better now than you did six months ago. Trust that."

I wanted to. I really did. But trusting myself when it came to William felt like trusting a recovering gambling addict to visit a casino "just to look around."

"I hate you."

"You love me. I'm your only constant source of sensible advice."

"I thought that was my therapist."

"Your therapist charges by the hour. I work for coffee and gratitude."

The afternoon settled into something comfortable. We finished unpacking the merchandise, then moved on to reorganizing the display shelves. A few customers drifted in—mostly teenagers looking at piercings, one older woman who spent twenty minutes examining band t-shirts before buying three of them. The studio filled with the particular energy of a business doing what it was meant to do.

Tui made coffee—his own blend, which was pretentious but also genuinely good—and we sat in the waiting area, drinking it while the afternoon light shifted through the windows.

"So," Tui said, setting down his cup, "when are you going to admit you still want to be with him?"

"I literally just spent twenty minutes explaining why I'm trying not to rush into anything."

"You also spent twenty minutes talking about how attractive he is and how you've never had a connection like that with anyone else. I can read between the lines."

"There are no lines. This is a line-free zone."

"Est."

"I'm being careful!"

"You're being scared. There's a difference."

Before I could respond with a devastating comeback, which I definitely had ready and was not at all scrambling to think of, the door chimed and someone new walked in.

Hong.

And he looked... different. The silver-haired tattoo artist was wearing actual coordinated clothing—a white t-shirt under a denim jacket that looked suspiciously new, white jeans that fit properly, his typical boots now accompanied by an array of rings I'd never seen before. His backpack was slung over one shoulder, but even that seemed more intentional somehow. Like he'd thought about his accessories.

Hong never thought about his accessories. Hong wore whatever was clean and occasionally forgot to brush his hair before public appearances.

"Where are you going all dressed up?" Tui asked, a grin spreading across his face.

Hong's cheeks flushed slightly. "Nowhere. Just—out."

"Out where?"

"Places."

"Specific places? With specific people?"

"P'Tui."

"I'm just asking. It's a simple question. You walk in looking like a magazine ad and I'm supposed to not comment?"

Hong dropped onto the couch beside me, reaching for the bag of popcorn that had mysteriously appeared on the coffee table. I was pretty sure it had been in the back room earlier. Tui's snack distribution system was a mystery I'd never solved.

"How was the exhibition?" Hong asked me, clearly desperate to change the subject. "I saw some of your photos online. They were incredible."

"Thank you. It was... intense."

"Did you talk to William?"

I shot a glance at Tui, who raised his hands in surrender.

"I didn't tell him anything. He's observant."

"I'm an artist," Hong said through a mouthful of popcorn. "Observing is literally my job."

"We talked," I admitted. "Briefly. At the exhibition. And then—after."

"After?"

"We've been texting."

Hong's eyebrows rose. He exchanged a look with Tui that communicated entire volumes in that annoying way best friends did.

"Texting about what?"

"The exhibition. Photography. His mother's house." I paused. "Mold."

"Mold?"

"There's apparently a lot of mold. In the house. That he's renovating."

"And you're texting about mold."

"Among other things."

Hong stared at me for a long moment, then turned to Tui.

"He's lost."

"Completely." Tui agreed.

"I am not lost! I'm being cautious!"

"You're texting a man about mold and pretending it's not flirting," Hong said flatly. "That's beyond lost. That's denial with a side of self-deception."

"How is discussing water damage flirting?"

"It's intimacy disguised as practicality. You're finding excuses to stay in contact while pretending you're not invested." Hong grabbed another handful of popcorn. "Classic avoidant attachment behavior with a romantic partner you're not admitting is a romantic partner."

"Have you been reading psychology articles again?"

"I've been in therapy. We all have. This is what happens when everyone you know is trying to be emotionally healthy."

Tui snorted. "He has a point."

"He has opinions," I corrected. "Which are not the same as points."

"My opinions are extremely valid," Hong said serenely. "I'm very wise. Ask anyone."

"Ask who? Nut?"

Hong's flush deepened noticeably. "Nut is irrelevant to this conversation."

"Is he? Because you're wearing new clothes and new rings and you look like you're about to go on a date—"

"I'm not going on a date!"

"—and the only person I've ever seen make you dress up is—"

The door chimed again.

Everyone turned.

And there, framed in the afternoon light, stood Lego.

He looked like a painting. I mean, Lego always looked like some kind of aesthetic concept rather than an actual human person, but today it was particularly pronounced. His dark hair was pulled up in a messy bun, held in place by what appeared to be an actual pencil, with wisps escaping to frame his face and his bangs cascading in soft curls. Light makeup accentuated his features—subtle enough to look natural, dramatic enough to draw the eye.

He was wearing a sheer cream-colored sweater over a tank top, paired with a black skirt that fell to mid-thigh and platform sandals that made his already slim figure look even more delicate. A black tote bag featuring some cartoon character I didn't recognize hung from his shoulder.

The knee brace was still visible, a reminder of injuries not yet fully healed.

Hong was on his feet before I could blink.

"Lego!" He crossed the studio and pulled the younger man into a hug, acting like they hadn't seen each other in months when I was fairly certain they'd hung out over the weekend. "You look amazing. Is that new? The sweater?"

"I got it yesterday," Lego said, his voice carrying that particular brightness that seemed to radiate from him at all times. "There was a sale. I couldn't resist."

"You never resist sales."

"That's because sales are proof that the universe wants us to have nice things."

Tui had stood too, moving toward Lego with an expression I'd seen only rarely on his face—soft, unguarded, the particular look of someone seeing their favorite person walk through a door.

Lego turned to him, and something shifted in the air.

"Hi." Lego said, quieter now.

"Hi." Tui responded.

Then Lego stepped forward and pressed a quick kiss to Tui's lips, casual and comfortable, like it was something they did all the time now.

Which, apparently, it was.

"Wait," I said, my brain catching up. "Wait, you two are—"

"Boyfriends," Lego confirmed, settling onto the couch and pulling Tui down beside him. "Officially. For about two weeks now."

"Two weeks?!"

"It's new."

"Two weeks is not new! Two weeks is established! Two weeks is 'we should probably tell our friends' territory!"

"We're telling you now," Tui said mildly. "Consider yourself informed."

I looked at Hong, who had returned to his seat and was watching the scene with a

knowing smile.

"Did you know about this?"

"I had suspicions."

"Suspensions? They just kissed in front of us!"

"That was confirmation."

"You're all terrible people and I'm reassessing every friendship I have."

Lego giggled—actually giggled, the kind of sound that made it impossible to stay mad at him. He'd tucked himself against Tui's side, his head resting on the older man's shoulder, looking more content than I'd seen him in months.

And then I noticed the rings. On both their hands. Matching. Silver bands with some kind of delicate pattern etched into the surface.

"God," Hong said, apparently noticing the same thing. "You're lost too, Tui."

Tui looked down at his hand, then at Lego's, a slow smile spreading across his face.

"Completely," he agreed. "And I have no plans to be found."

Lego's cheeks flushed pink, but he was smiling—that genuine, unguarded smile that made everyone around him want to protect him from all the world's sharp edges.

"When did this happen?" I demanded. "The rings. The—all of it."

"After the showcase. He was so exhausted, and I just—" He paused, looking at Lego with an expression that made my chest ache. "I just knew. That I didn't want to spend another day pretending I didn't feel this way."

"And I said yes before he could finish the question," Lego added. "I'd been waiting so long for him to ask."

"You could have asked me." Tui pointed out.

"I was scared. You kept saying you were too old for me, too damaged, that I deserved better—"

"I was an idiot."

"You were cautious. There's a difference." Lego's eyes found mine as he said it, pointed in a way that made me squirm. "Being careful isn't the same as being right. Sometimes you have to take the risk even when it's terrifying."

I looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

"I'm happy for you," I said, and I meant it. "Both of you. This is—it's good. It's really good."

"Thank you." Tui's voice was warm. "Now, are we going to discuss the elephant in the room, or are we going to pretend you weren't just spiraling about William?"

"I was not spiraling!"

"You literally described texting about mold as 'complicated,'" Hong said. "That's spiraling."

"There was context!"

"There's always context with you. Context is your defense mechanism."

Lego leaned forward, his expression shifting from contentment to concern. "You're talking to William again?"

"We're texting. Occasionally. About professional things."

"Mold is not professional," Hong muttered.

"The exhibition photos are professional! The mold was—adjacent to professional topics."

"Adjacent."

"Peripherally related!"

"P'Est." Lego's voice was gentle. "It's okay to still have feelings for him. It doesn't mean you've failed at therapy."

"I'm not—I don't—" I dropped my head into my hands. "I don't know what I'm feeling. That's the problem, months ago, I knew exactly what to feel. He was the storm. I was the person learning not to chase storms. Everything was clear."

"And now?"

"Now he's texting me about mold and talking about how honest things can also be beautiful and I don't know what any of it means."

The studio was quiet for a moment. The background music continued its ambient flow. The afternoon light continued its slow shift across the floor.

"Can I tell you something?" Lego said finally. "About P'William?"

"You probably will whether I want you to or not."

"He's different. Genuinely different. I've known him since we were kids, and I've never seen him like this." Lego's hand found Tui's, their fingers interlacing. "The

exhibition, the therapy, leaving his apartment—he's doing the work. Not because you asked him to. Because he wants to be better. Because he finally understands what he lost and he doesn't want to be that person anymore."

"That doesn't mean—"

"It doesn't mean you have to take him back. It doesn't mean you owe him anything. But it might mean that the person you're protecting yourself from doesn't exist anymore." Lego's eyes were serious. "Sometimes people really do change, P'Est. Sometimes the second version is worth knowing."

I stared at him.

"When did you become the emotionally intelligent one?" I asked.

"I've always been emotionally intelligent. I just hide it behind stuffed animals and sparkly nails."

"To be fair," Hong added, "he gives very good advice. I'd listen to him."

"You would. You're going on a date with Nut and pretending you're not."

Hong's flush returned with a vengeance. "I am not—how do you even—"

"The new clothes. The rings. The fact that you keep checking your phone when you think we're not looking." I shrugged. "I'm a photographer. I notice things."

"I hate all of you."

"Welcome to the club," I said. "Meetings are Tuesdays. Snacks are provided."

By the time I left the studio, the afternoon had faded into early evening. Bangkok's lights were starting to flicker on, the city transforming itself from the chaos of daytime into the different chaos of night. I walked slowly, in no particular hurry to get anywhere, letting the familiar streets carry me while my thoughts sorted themselves into something resembling order.

My phone had been buzzing periodically throughout the afternoon—notifications I'd been ignoring in favor of actual human conversation. Now, walking alone, I finally pulled it out.

Three messages from Nut about a potential new project.

Two from a gallery owner asking about prints.

And one from William.

William: I hope I'm not bothering you.

Sent two hours ago. When I'd been too busy mocking Hong's obvious date preparations to notice.

William: Lego says I text too much. He's probably right. I'm still learning how this works.

William: Feel free to ignore me. I won't be offended.

Three messages, progressively more uncertain, from a man who'd spent three years not talking to anyone and was now trying to figure out how to exist in connection.

My chest did something complicated.

Est: You're not bothering me. I was at Tui's studio. My phone was in my bag.

The response came almost immediately:

William: Oh. Good. I wasn't sure.

Est: Not sure about what?

William: Whether the silence was intentional. Whether I'd said something wrong. Whether you were practicing healthy boundaries.

William: Those last two might be the same thing.

I laughed, drawing a concerned look from a passing stranger. I waved apologetically and ducked into the doorway of a closed shop, giving myself space to respond without walking into traffic.

Est: I'm not great at healthy boundaries. Ask anyone who knows me.

William: That makes two of us.

William: Though I'm told I'm learning.

Est: How's the mold situation?

William: Still moldy. I've been given a list of contractors by approximately everyone I've ever met. Apparently having friends means receiving unsolicited home repair advice.

Est: That does sound like friendship.

William: It's exhausting. Also wonderful. Confusing combination.

I smiled at my phone like an idiot. This was dangerous. This was exactly the kind of behavior I'd been warned about—finding his awkwardness charming, his honesty

endearing, his attempts at humor actually funny.

Est: Did you survive the renovation chaos today?

William: Mostly. Lego made me pull weeds for two hours. He claims it's therapeutic. I claim it's manual labor.

William: The roses are "salvageable." His exact word. He was very excited about it.

Est: Lego gets excited about plants. It's a character trait.

William: He also gets excited about rings, apparently.

William: Did you know? About him and Tui?

Est: I found out today. They were wearing matching rings and kissing in the studio. Subtle.

William: He seemed very happy.

William: I'm glad. He deserves to be happy.

Est: So do you.

The message sent before I could second-guess it. Too honest. Too direct. But there it was, out in the digital void, waiting for a response.

Three dots appeared.

William: I'm working on it.

William: Some days are harder than others.

William: Today wasn't bad though.

Est: What made it not bad?

William: Getting the house. Making progress. Talking to you.

My heart did something entirely unauthorized.

Est: I should probably go. I'm standing in a doorway staring at my phone like a creep.

William: That's a very specific image.

Est: It's a very accurate description.

William: Then you should definitely go. Being a doorway creep is bad for your reputation.

Est: What reputation?

William: The one where you're a serious professional photographer and not someone who stands in doorways texting about mold.

Est: That reputation is already destroyed. You've seen me at my worst.

William: I've seen you at your most honest. That's different from worst.

The echo of my own words from earlier. Honest versus beautiful. He was using my language, speaking in the particular rhythm we'd developed, building something in the space between our messages.

Est: I'm going now. Before you say something else that makes me smile in public.

William: Is smiling in public bad?

Est: It makes people think I'm happy. Unacceptable.

William: We can't have that.

William: Goodnight, Est.

Est: Goodnight, William.

I pocketed my phone and stepped out of the doorway, rejoining the flow of Bangkok pedestrians.

The evening air was warm and thick, carrying the particular combination of exhaust and food and humanity that defined this city. I walked without destination, letting the streets carry me, processing the afternoon's revelations.

Tui and Lego were together. Officially. Wearing matching rings and kissing casually, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Hong was going on a date with Nut, no matter how much he denied it. The new clothes were proof. The flush when anyone mentioned it was confirmation.

And me?

I was texting with William about mold and calling it professional correspondence.

Lego's words echoed in my head: Sometimes the second version is worth knowing.

Was this William the second version? The one who'd done the work, who'd faced his fears, who was learning to exist in connection after years of isolation? Or was this just another storm dressed up in growth and therapy, waiting to sweep me away again?

I didn't know. Couldn't know. Not yet. But for the first time in months, the not-knowing didn't feel terrifying. It felt like possibility.

I pulled out my phone one more time, opening the camera app instead of messages. The street around me was alive with evening light—vendors setting up food stalls, couples walking hand in hand, the particular energy of a city that never quite slept.

I took a photograph. Then another. Then a dozen more.

This was what I knew how to do. This was how I processed the world—through images, through composition, through the particular art of paying attention.

Tomorrow, I would wake up and keep editing the exhibition photos. I would send William something clever about aesthetics. I would probably check my messages too frequently and pretend I wasn't doing exactly that. But tonight, I walked through Bangkok with my camera in hand, documenting the ordinary magic of people living their lives.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, underneath all the caution and the therapy insights and the carefully constructed walls, a small voice whispered something that sounded suspiciously like hope.

Maybe, it said. Maybe this time could be different.

I didn't tell it to shut up.

That was probably significant.

When I finally made it home, my apartment was exactly as I'd left it—laptop open on the desk, photographs of William still queued for editing, the resurrection plant on its small table doing its slow, patient work of being alive. I kicked off my shoes and collapsed onto my bed, staring at the ceiling.

My phone buzzed. One final message.

William: Thank you for talking to me today. It helped more than you know.

I stared at the words for a long time.

Then I typed back:

Est: Anytime.

And meant it.